

2. Would this still be a poem if it were printed as a paragraph? Compare this poem with Carolyn Forché's "The Colonel" (p. 404), which is written as a paragraph. Which do you find more "poetic"? Explain.

3. What is meant by the last two lines of the poem?

### Writing Topic

One theory of literature says that fiction allows us to vicariously experience moral dilemmas and test our own reactions. Discuss this poem and Ursula K. Le Guin's story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (p. 335) from this perspective. How would you answer the poet's questions? Would you walk away from Omelas?

Alicia Suskin Ostriker (b. 1937)

## Poem Beginning with a Line by Fitzgerald/Hemingway 1998

The very rich are different from us, they  
Have more money, fewer scruples.<sup>1</sup> The very

Attractive have more lovers, the very sensitive  
Go mad more easily, and the very brave

Distress a coward like myself, so listen  
Scott, listen Ernest, and you also can

Listen, Walt Whitman. I understand the large  
Language of rhetoricians, but not the large

Hearts of the heroes.<sup>2</sup> I am reading up.  
I want someone to tell me what solvent saves

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Their cardiac chambers from sediment, what is  
The shovel that cuts the sluice

Straight from the obvious mottoes such as *Love*  
*Your neighbor as yourself*,<sup>3</sup> or *I am human, therefore*

<sup>1</sup> In a famous conversation recorded by Ernest Hemingway in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway's fellow-novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald remarked, "The very rich are different from us," and Hemingway responded, "Yes, Scott, they have more money."

<sup>2</sup> See Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," sec. 33, "I understand the large hearts of heroes."

<sup>3</sup> See the New Testament, Mark 12:31.

*Nothing human is alien*,<sup>4</sup> to the physical arm  
In the immaculate ambassadorial shirtsleeves<sup>5</sup>

— We are in Budapest, '44 — that waves  
Off the muddy Gestapo in the railroad yard

With an imperious, an impatient flourish,  
And is handing Swedish passports to anonymous

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Yellow-starred arms<sup>6</sup> reaching from the very boxcars  
That are packed and ready to glide with a shrill

Whistle and grate on steel, out of the town,  
Like God's biceps and triceps gesturing

Across the void to Adam:<sup>7</sup> Live. In Cracow  
A drinking, wenching German businessman<sup>8</sup>

Bribes and cajoles, laughs and negotiates  
Over the workers, spends several times a fortune,

Saves a few thousand Jews, including one  
He wins at a card game, and sets to work

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In his kitchenware factory. A summer twilight  
Soaks a plateau in southern France, the mountains

Mildly visible, and beyond them Switzerland,  
As the policeman climbs from the khaki bus

To Le Chambon square, where the tall pastor<sup>9</sup>  
Refuses to give names of refugees;

<sup>4</sup> A line from *The Self-Tormentor*, a play by the Roman dramatist Terence (186?–159? B.C.).

<sup>5</sup> Raoul Wallenberg (1912–1947), a Swedish diplomat who became legendary through his activities in rescuing Hungarian Jews during World War II. He is "The handsome Swede" of line 42.

<sup>6</sup> The Nazis required that Jews identify themselves by wearing a visible Star of David on their clothing.

<sup>7</sup> An allusion to the famous Michelangelo fresco on the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel depicting the creation of life.

<sup>8</sup> Oskar Schindler (1908–1974) was a German businessman who saved many Jews from the Nazi death camps by employing them in his factory in Poland. His exploits described in this passage are the subject of Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's List* and Steven Spielberg's film of the same name.

<sup>9</sup> André Trocmé (1908–1973), Protestant minister of Le Chambon, Switzerland, built a rescue network to shelter Jews from the Nazis during World War II.

Meanwhile young men slip through the plotted streets,  
Fan out to the farms — it is '42 —

So that the houses empty and the cool woods fill  
With Jews and their false papers, so that the morning

Search finds no soul to arrest. It happens  
Over and over, but how? The handsome Swede<sup>10</sup>

Was rich, was bored, one might have said. The pastor  
Had his habit of hugging and kissing, and was good

At organizing peasants, intellectuals  
And bible students. The profiteer intended

To amass wealth. He did, lived steep, and ended  
Penniless, though the day the war ended,

The day they heard, over the whistling wireless,  
the distant voice of Churchill<sup>11</sup> barking victory

As the Russians advanced, his *Schindlerjuden*<sup>12</sup>  
Still in the plant, still safe, as he moved to flee,

Made him a small present. Jerets provided  
His mouth's gold bridgework, Licht<sup>13</sup> melted it down,

Engraved the circle-of-the ring with what  
One reads in Talmud:<sup>14</sup> *Who saves a single life,*

*It is as if he saved the universe;* and Schindler  
The German took it, he wears it in his grave;

I am reading up on this. I did not know  
Life had undone so many deaths.<sup>15</sup> *Now go*

<sup>10</sup> See note 5.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965), British prime minister during World War II.

<sup>12</sup> Literally "Schindler's Jews," the group name adopted by the Jews Schindler saved from the Nazi death camps (see note 8).

<sup>13</sup> Jerets and Licht are the names of two of "Schindler's Jews."

<sup>14</sup> The Talmud is the ancient collection of Jewish law and tradition.

<sup>15</sup> The line echoes a line from T. S. Eliot's landmark *The Waste Land* (1922), a long poem on the decay and spiritual aridity of modern Western civilization. At the conclusion of section I, titled "The Burial of the Dead," the speaker watches as crowds flow robot-like over London Bridge, and exclaims: "I had not thought death had undone so many."

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<sup>16</sup> In the bib  
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a traveler beater  
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<sup>17</sup> See Walt V  
bones."

And do likewise,<sup>16</sup> snaps every repercussion  
Of my embarrassed heart, which is like a child

Alone in a classroom full of strangers, thinking  
She would like to run away. Let me repeat,

Though I do not forget ovens or guns,  
Their names: Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler,

André Trocmé. Europe was full of others  
As empty space is full of burning suns;

Not equally massive or luminous,  
Creating heat, nevertheless, and light,

Creating what we may plausibly write  
Up as the sky, a that without which nothing;

We cannot guess how many, only that they  
Were subject to arrest each bloody day

And managed. Maybe it's like the muse, incalculable,  
What you can pray in private for. Or a man

You distantly adore, who may someday love you  
In the very cave of loneliness. We are afraid —

Yet as no pregnant woman knows beforehand  
If she will go through labor strong, undrugged,

Unscreaming, and no shivering soldier knows  
During pre-combat terror who will retreat,

Who stand and fight, so we cannot predict  
Who among us will risk the fat that clings

Sweetly to our own bones —  
None sweeter, Whitman promises —<sup>17</sup>

Our life, to save doomed lives, and none of us  
Can know before the very day arrives.

<sup>16</sup> In the biblical parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan who, in contrast to the priest and the Levite who “passed by on the other side,” tended to a traveler beaten and robbed by thieves. Jesus’ admonition to follow the example of the good Samaritan illustrates the Christian response to the question: “Who is my neighbor?”

<sup>17</sup> See Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” line 20: “I find no sweeter fat than clings to my own bones.”

**For Analysis**

1. Why does the poet begin with the exchange between Fitzgerald and Hemingway?
2. How does the speaker characterize herself?
3. Explain the phrase "the large / Language of rhetoricians" (ll. 7–8).
4. Formulate the questions the speaker is trying to answer in this poem.

**For Writing**

1. Examine the metaphor of the "cardiac chambers" and the "shovel that cuts the sluice" (ll. 11–12), the allusion to Michelangelo's fresco (ll. 24–25), and the simile of the "pregnant woman" (ll. 79–80). How effective are they?
2. Use this poem as a starting point for an essay on the meaning of heroism.
3. If you have personally risked some danger in acting on your beliefs, describe the experience.